

A

S E R M O N

Preached before the

UNIVERSITY of OXFORD,

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O. N.

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O X F O R D,

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A circular ink stamp from the British Museum, containing the text "MVSEVM BRITAN NICVM" in a serif font, arranged in three lines.

I P E T. III. 15, 16.

Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear ;

Having a good conscience, that whereas they speak evil of you as of evil doers, they may be ashamed who falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ.

THE first part of this passage seemeth not easily reconcileable, either with the plain scope and design of the epistle where it is found, (which is, throughout, a call to the simplicity of christian holiness ;) or with the professions and exhortations of our author's beloved brother *Paul*, (who every where disclaimeth and decrith disputation, and the σοιζα, the *elements* of human philosophy, and the enticing words of man's wisdom ;) or with the example of our blessed Saviour himself, who, we read, refused to give answers to the many questions put to him by the malevolent high priest concerning his disciples and his doctrine.

IN opposition to all this, the passage before us seemeth to prescribe reasoning and disputation on the subject of our christian hope, and hath, accordingly, been set in the front of many discourses of the polemical kind, as the canon and warrant which authorizeth and requirith christian Divines, and, indeed, all christians, to employ themselves, as often as occasion shall offer itself, in theological dispute and altercation with opposing infidels. Nay, a writer of some note in the world of metaphysics and abstraction, hath even ventured to ascribe the wonderful propagation of the gospel in the first Ages of the Church, to the influence of this precept of *St. Peter*, which he representeth as having urged the primitive Christians to “furnish themselves with apt matter of reply to all questions, which,” saith he, “in the common course of things would arise, when a system was proposed, different from what had obtained before, and in many points entirely inconsistent with matters which had been reckoned sacred.”

WHETHER the conversions of those genuine Christians who adorned the first ages of the Church of Christ were effected by these supposed efforts of human reason, or by a more powerful, tho’ apparently a feeblér, cause, may easily be learned from a commonly attentive survey of the histories which relate those conversions. At present we may just observe, that subtile, philosophical reasonings are little

likely to have had any share in gaining those converts, whose common sense hath been more than once called in question by men of reason and refinement,* for nothing else but because they have betrayed an ignorance in certain points of philosophy and literature; and, in the very *foolishness of preaching*, seem to have directed all their endeavours, not so much to the adapting the doctrines of Christ's religion to philosophical standards, as to the enforcing of meekness and humility and repentance, and to the sanctifying and cleansing, thro' a living faith in Christ, the hearts of their disciples from all those impurities of flesh and spirit, which will alike hold the wise and the foolish who are defiled by them, in a state of alienation from God and heavenly immortality. But whatever may become of this remark, and how great soever the propriety may be thought to be, of giving an answer to every sort of attack which is made on the gospel of Christ, we may at least venture to affirm that the words of *St. Peter*, now before us, must by no means be cited as countenancing, much less as prescribing such procedure.

IT hath been already hinted, that the scope and tenor of this whole epistle is to build up holy, sincere, patient, humble, persevering christians, not to form a school of disputants, ready to take the alarm and snatch up the pen at every bold and blasphemous suggestion of infidelity: and the passage now in our view is dictated with the same design, in the same spirit of

a *Barbeyrac* and *Dr. Middleton*.

meekness with the other parts of the epistle. Read it, indeed, in the translation from which I have been obliged to cite it, and it will seem to bear the very sense, in which, by being so read, it hath been hastily understood. But take the original into your hand, and you will find that what is there commanded you, is, to be always (not, *furnished with apt matter of reply to every cavilling question*; an impracticable, unmeasurable task to the very prodigies of learning! how much more, to the simple and unlearned? but,) *ετοιμοι*, *disposed and willing*, (the constant sense of the word *ετοιμος*;) *προς απολογιαν* *to offer an apology to every man*, (not, that arrogantly demandeth, but,) *αιτουντι μετα πραυτητος και φοβας*, *that, with meekness, and reverence to the subject, asketh, requesteth of you*, *λογον* (not, *της ελπιδος*, but, *ΠΕΡΙ της ελπιδος*) *a discourse*, (for the word *λογος* never signifieth *a reason*, in the sense which that word beareth in our bible-translation of this verse, and can here signify nothing else but *a discourse*) *concerning the hope which is in you*, the divine doctrines by which ye hope to attain eternal salvation: *Having, maintaining, a good conscience, that whereas they*, (not the meek, reverential enquirer, but, the furious enemies of the cross of Christ) *speaking evil of you as of evil doers, they may be ashamed who thus falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ.*

IT is notorious that the doctrines of Christ's religion and it's professors were, in those days of rebuke and blasphemy, every where spoken against and misrepresented; and what could be

more

more proper and necessary, than that christians should be thus willing and disposed to undeceive sincere, ingenuous, modest enquirers; to lay the matter of fact before them; to give them a detail of the genuine doctrines of the gospel, with their plain, simple, immediate evidence; to disavow the monstrous doctrines and practices, which, as we learn from the old apologists, were laid to the charge of the gospel and its professors; and, above all, by a clear conscience and an uniformly well-ordered life, to retort shame upon the false accusers of their blameless conversation.

THIS is the *apology* which the apostle here requireth faithful christians to be ever willing and disposed to offer. The word *απολογία* will not be found, either in the new testament or in ancient authors, to signify any thing else than such a defence as I have now described; “a plain and true state of facts, which have been misrepresented to the prejudice of such persons or things, as the apologist is concerned to vindicate.” And if some of the ancient christian writers, who gave to their performances the title of *apology*, proceeded farther than this, and, leaving the solid ground of fact, expatiated into the airy regions of metaphysical reasoning, this procedure must be placed to the account of their own indiscretion; nor can any argument be drawn from their example, to evince that such reasoning is recommended or countenanced by St. *Peter* in the passage under our consideration.

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THE sense now given of that passage, indisputably it's true and genuine sense, will serve to remove the difficulty intimated to you immediately on our entrance upon this subject, namely, that of reconciling this precept of *St. Peter* with the example of our blessed Saviour, and with the repeated professions and exhortations of *St. Paul*.

OF our blessed Saviour we read, as hath been observed, that he was by no means disposed, but peremptorily refused, to give such an answer, as *St. Peter's* words have been thought to recommend, to the captious questions of the high priest, concerning his disciples and his doctrine: yet will He be found to have advanced the very kind of apology whose nature hath now been set before you. *St. Paul* will assure us that *our Lord Jesus Christ, before Pontius Pilate, witnessed a good confession*, made, for himself and for his doctrines, a just and proper apology. Where then doth this good confession, this standard-apology occur? It consisted in nothing else than his asserting, with a conscious dignity, *the plain fact*: "To this end was I born, and for this
 " cause came I into the world, that I might bear
 " witness to the truth; every one that is of the
 " truth heareth my voice." And if the government had seriously put the question "what is
 " truth?" and had waited for an answer to it, can we suppose, as some seem to suppose, who have undertaken to supply the defect of our blessed Saviour's reply, that He would have led the enquirer through the labyrinth of metaphysical

fical disquisition in order to satisfy his enquiry?
 or doth not the proper answer to it occur in
 his discourses on other occasions? Thus, "I,
 "saith he, am the way, the *truth* and the life,
 "no man cometh to the father but by me." In
 his account, you see, the *truth*, emphatically
 speaking, is that guide which leadeth us unto
 God, and that guide is Christ. Again, "If any
 "man will do his will, he shall know of the
 "doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I
 "speak of myself." The knowledge then, which
 alone perhaps deserveth that name, the know-
 ledge which availeth unto salvation, is to be
 sought, not "inter silvas academi," in the woods,
 the endless intricacies of sceptical disputation,
 but in an honest, and good, and penitent heart,
 inflamed with an earnest desire to hear, and a
 stedfast purpose to obey the word of God. It is
 this fixed attachment of the heart to our heaven-
 ly instructor, and not the *elementary truths*, as
 the loose conclusions have been stiled, of science
 falsely so called, this, I say, is the rock on which
 the house will stand impregnable against the rain
 and wind and floods; this is the armour which
 will render the plain, unlettered, simple christ-
 ian a nobler champion for the cause of Jehovah
 and his anointed, than *seven men, who*, in their
 own conceit, *can render a reason* for every step
 of God's procedure in the creation, government,
 and redemption of mankind.

WE have seen the consistency between our
 blessed Saviour's conduct and the genuine sense
 of the passage before us. And the same consist-
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ency will, at first sight, appear between it and the professions and exhortations of St. *Paul*. The apostle every where were indeed, as we have before observed, disclaimeth the disputing philosophy of the Greeks, the enticing words of man's wisdom, those subtle reasonings which the words of my text have generally been understood and quoted to authorize. And in conformity to this sentiment we read, that tho' he *therefore* withdrew himself, ^a as St. *Luke* seemeth to intimate, from the circle of *athenian* philosophers, *because* they mocked at his doctrine of the resurrection, and loudly demanded a disputation with him upon that curious subject, conceiving, probably, that they were able to demonstrate the impossibility of the fact by arguments *a priori*: yet did this very *Paul* frequently stand forth *προς απολογιαν*, ^b to make a formal *apology* for himself and for his hope in Christ Jesus; and expressly informeth us that he is appointed *εις απολογιαν τῆς ευαγγελίας*, ^c to set forth and declare the doctrines of the gospel by his preaching, and to exemplify them by his conversation: a task which in what manner he executed, how agreeably to St. *Peter's* idea of the christian apology, let his life and writings declare!

LET us now take an uninterrupted view of the passage under our consideration, thus expounded according to it's plain, obvious meaning, together with it's context.

^a *Act.* 17. 33. Καὶ ΟΥΤΩΣ ὁ Παῦλος ἐξηλθεν.

^b This word is always used in the *Acts*, where St. *Paul's* defences are mention'd.

^c *Philip.* 1. 17.

THE whole of it containeth an affectionate exhortation to perseverance in christian duty, whatever dangers and difficulties may be thrown in our way from the malice and violence of wicked men. "If ye suffer for righteousness "happy are ye. And be not afraid of their "fear, neither be ye disturbed; but sanctify the "Lord God in your hearts, let Him be your "only object of fear, your only armour against "every other. Yet if any one shall, with gentleness and reverence, request of you to set before him in discourse, the great, important "doctrines of the gospel, on which your *hope* of "salvation resteth, be not backward, be always "willing and disposed to set it forth in it's own "native and beautiful simplicity, and, by a plain "declaration of facts, become it's apologists against those foul accusations, which, by the allegation of false facts, have been framed against it. Sollicitously careful, in the mean time, "to preserve your consciences unspotted, and "clear from the taint of any of those enormous "crimes, which it is usual for abandoned men "to lay to the charge of those, who run not with them to the same excess of riot, but are earnest to call a profligate world to repentance "and a living faith in Jesus Christ: your consciences being thus pure and untainted, the "monstrous accusations of your persecutors will "fall upon their own heads; shame shall be "their portion, when it shall appear, upon the "most malignant scrutiny, that ye are innocent "of those scandalous practices which they had

“alledged against you, in order to discredit the
“gospel through it’s professors.”

THE proposition obviously implied in this precept of *St. Peter*, a precept of never-ceasing obligation, is this, that the true and only defence and recommendation of the gospel of Christ, consisteth in the setting forth of the truth of facts, in opposition to false allegations advanced; and in maintaining that innocence and clearness in life and manners, which may make the false accuser ashamed. No process of time hath altered or can alter the nature and state of the everlasting gospel: the same evidence, thro’ all ages, inviteth all mankind to embrace it, and when embraced, it is the same power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; that, with the implicit, active assent of a meek and penitent heart, giveth himself up to it’s guidance. Let the christian advocate set forth the gospel of Christ, as the powerful instrument employed by God for the salvation of all, who repent and place their confidence in the Redeemer; let his life be conformable to the doctrines he professeth; and then let him rest perswaded that God will, without the help of philosophick labours, provide for the establishment of his church, however the heathen may furiously rage together, however the kings of the earth may stand up, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against his anointed. That apology for the gospel which was enjoined to *St. Paul*,^a and which *St. Peter*

^a *Philip. i. 17.* Εἰς Ἀπολογίαν τοῦ Εὐαγγελίου κειμαι.

enjoineth

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enjoineth to all true believers, extendeth no farther than to this setting forth of the plain, genuine doctrines of the gospel, (repentance towards God, and faith, affiance in our Lord Jesus Christ, and in his appointed means of salvation,) and enforcing them by the allegation of those miraculous facts, and prophecies fulfilled, by which our blessed Saviour and his apostles ascertained their divine mission.

THE busy Vanity of unbelievers will indeed attack this glorious gospel by reasonings drawn from all the sources of human learning; but this is the one apology which is able to repel them all. It was by this kind of appeal to the written word of God, that our blessed Saviour put to silence, in the wilderness, the grand adversary of mankind; and the same appeal will ever be found sufficient, if not to silence, yet to overcome all those who fight under his banner. Let but christians hold themselves intrenched in their own consecrated ground, the ground on which the christian faith was built by it's inspired apologists, namely the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone, and all arguments levelled against this faith from the armoury of metaphysics and the imagined reasons of things, will fall harmless to the earth. But if they once desert this advantageous, this naturally fortified post, and, through eagerness for the honour of a victory, pursue the enemy into the bogs and quagmires of abstract reasoning, the very province of the ruler of the darkness of this world,

they will then fall a sure prey to his devices. Those weapons which are mighty to the pulling down of strong holds, and arm the christian warrior to the overthrow of reasonings, * and of every thought that exalteth itself against the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, will be here of no use to them; and though their own conceit, or the flattery of their friends may compliment them as on a victory obtained by the fleshly weapons of philosophy, yet it is probably a victory which none besides will acknowledge; at best, a victory which doth not any whit subdue the stubborn enemy, nor advance the kingdom of God in the hearts of those, who call themselves the friends of the christian cause: nay, perhaps, however undisputed, it is such a victory, as, proceeding upon some fancied, false hypothesis, the truth of the gospel is altogether unconcerned in.

THE more there is of truth in these reflections, the more is it to be lamented, that almost the whole current of theological labours hath, of late years, been directed into the channel of abstract reasoning; and issue hath been joined with infidels upon points, which, admitting only of topical argumentation, could never, by the wit of man, be so determined, as to put an end to the controversy, but left still an infinite field of cavil to ingenious subtlety; a field in which the celebrated sceptic *Bayle* is known to have boasted, that no question could occur, of which

he was not able to defend either side with equal appearance of probability.

IT will not therefore, I hope, be thought an useless undertaking, to attempt to evince the necessary weakness of human reason in metaphysical or abstract disquisition; and to call back the labours of christian writers and preachers, at least to direct those of the rising generation, to their proper province, the enforcing of christian truths by their own christian arguments, and by the still more prevailing argument of a christian life, a good conscience, and faith unfeigned.

IT is not to be denied or doubted, that the reason of man is sufficiently qualified for the discovery of truth, in every instance where the whole merits of the cause can be laid before her. Let but the ideas compared by her be distinct and clear, and their agreements or repugnancies evident and certain, and her conclusions will and must be irrefragably true.

BUT it must be remembered that this is a compliment, which being founded on the two-fold supposition, of clearness, and evidence, can seldom turn to her advantage. Give her her stable, fixed point, and, as *Archimedes* boasted, she will move the world, lead her followers into certain and indubitable truth. Yet how seldom doth it happen, that the disquisitions of reason can turn upon fixed and stable points! Run over all the sorts of subjects on which her speculation is usually employed, and you will find in most of them, that some part or other of the system is lame and inevident, that some link of the chain
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is loosely and weakly connected with it's fellows.

BUT supposing reason to be happily able, first, to examine and view clearly her ideas, and next, by a judicious introduction of proofs, to discover, with the most glaring evidence, the connection between them; it will still remain to be enquired, whether the conclusion obtained be worth the pains which have been employed in searching after it. It may, after all, prove a shining bubble, which, when caught, is found void of substantial reality. Let the perceptions be ever so clear and distinct, let the relation between them be ever so glaringly evident, yet, if the ideas compared have nothing in nature correspondent to them, the knowledge gained by them will still be all mockery and delusion, and though dignified with the pompous title of a *proposition of eternal truth*, will no more approach to *reality*, than the idle tales related in some romance.

ON this account also, the disquisitions of reason will be found miserably defective. Notwithstanding her boasted, rapid flight beyond the stars, notwithstanding her pretended free excursions into the invisible region of spirits, yet are most of her conclusions, nay all, but such as are founded upon clear, known facts, ingenious conjectures: her work is built upon meer suppositions, which though they be, by the prevalence of philosophick fashion, universally perhaps, embraced, yet are seen from time to time dying away, after having flourished for their season,
and

and giving way to others, which must, in their turns too, wither and fall to the ground.

THE truth of this assertion is but too pregnantly testified by those enormous heaps of forgotten volumes, which, by the care of the curious, have, in some repositories, escaped the ruins of time: volumes, which, in their day, procured to their authors the reputation of subtle wits, discoverers of truth, irrefragable reasoners, but are now twirled over with the same smile of pity, which will in a few years, perhaps, be bestowed on those *enlightened* writers who pity them.

THUS will terminate the glory of — *delineations of the religion of nature; discourses on the ideas of beauty and virtue; illustrations upon the moral sense; essays on man, and on the origin of evil; reasonings a priori concerning the being and attributes of God; pleadings for the expediency of a revelation, as a moral rule, when it's certainty and it's destination to a more important purpose is confirmed to us by divine authority. Topical objections against the bible and gospel-histories; disquisitions concerning the propriety of God's procedure in the fall and redemption of mankind; —* all such performances, grounded on arbitrary suppositions, fantastic ideas, or unscriptural conceptions of the divine essence and œconomy, and of the state and history of man; such performances must fall, and in God's good time must all give way together to scripture-authority, to wholesome words, and the doctrine of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; and in the mean time, they must successively give way to

to the new airy systems and fancied discoveries of *rising adventurers*, who seek for *earthly* honour and glory and immortality by the subtle and dextrous exercise of metaphysick wit.

BUT if the field of abstract speculation yield no firm ground to our steps; if reason here walketh in a vain shadow, and disquieteth herself in vain; it will be asked, what then is her proper province? on what soil may she tread securely? I answer briefly, that *matter of fact* is the only sure and steady basis, whereon conclusions can be firmly erected. Where plain *fact* lieth evident before us, there we can reason with strength and confidence; where this is wanting, there the train of reasoning, however subtle and refined, is nothing more than specious declamation. And agreeably hereto we may observe, that nothing is more idly attended to in courts of judicature, than the reasonings of an orator, who affecteth to advance arguments *a priori* drawn from topical sources, neglecting those evidences of fact, by which the judges are always directed to regulate their verdict.

IN all metaphysical reasonings, whether having God, or man, or nature for their object, there is and must be a tacit reference to *reality and fact*, which He must be supposed to *know*, who is supposed to obtain knowledge by means of these reasonings. Thus he who would metaphysically demonstrate a system of those religious truths, which concern the human species, must previously know, in *fact and reality*, what the divine being is in his nature, will, and attributes, and
also

also what is the nature and constitution of man; for what purposes he was created; what changes have happened in him, what changes are farther intended to be introduced, and what are the means appointed for introducing them. All abstract reasonings or essays on man without these *præcognita*, will necessarily abound with error and absurdity; and however *men* may admire, or even fall down and worship them, he that dwelleth in heaven, and beholdeth afar off the wide wanderings of the self-conceited moralist, shall have them in derision.

AND yet, necessary as this knowledge of facts is to those rational disquisitions, whose aim is the discovery of real truth, reason with all her sagacious ingenuity is utterly incapable of attaining this knowledge, which can ordinarily come into the mind by no other way, than by the mediate or immediate testimony of the senses. And accordingly, all those facts or realities either concerning God himself and his acts, or the past history and future destination of the human race, which He saw fitting to communicate to mankind, are signified to us, not by reason left to it's own guesses, (which may *imagine* facts, but cannot of itself perceive, and discover them) but by declarations made to us by his Son, and by his apostles and prophets, authenticating their message by astonishing and awful miracles.

IT will be demanded, did not reason, then, intimate certain facts to the heathen world concerning the existence and attributes of God, and the duties of man resulting from those attributes?

butes? Were not the dictates of reason written in their hearts? and was it not by her light that they were, in the stile of the apostle, a law unto themselves?

I answer, first, that it is no consequence, that because the heathen world had certain notions concerning the existence and attributes of God, therefore these notions were investigated by the researches of human reason; because the knowledge of these things, which was communicated by revelations to the patriarchs, might naturally be derived from them to the rest of the world, in their own and following ages: and also, because we are actually informed by *St. Paul*, that ^a wisdom, or the efforts of reason, did not attain to, but ^b rather obscured and corrupted the knowledge of God; however such a genius as *Socrates*,^c might easily, in *the things that are made*, find matter for demonstrating the existence, and the wisdom of a creator, who was before made known to him from traditional revelation.

I answer, secondly, that it doth by no means follow, that because the virtuous heathen were a law unto themselves, therefore reason was that law. Reason, which is nothing more than a meer speculative principle, able perhaps accurately to state, and limit and define the several species of moral goodness, but utterly incapable of urging the man to virtuous practice; seeing and approv-

a 1 Cor. I. 21. Ο κρησμος δις της σοφιας εκ γγνω τον Θεον.

b Rom. I. 22. Φασκοντες ειναι σοφοι, εμωρανθησαν και ηλλαξαν τω δοξαν τα αφαρτα Θεου εν ομωμοις εις κρησος φαρτα ανθρωπου, και πτενων και τετραποδων και ερπενων.

c Xen. Mem. Cap. 5. Lib. I.

ing the more excellent way, but powerless to lead us in it. Doth it not rather follow, that this faculty, which, where it hath shone brightest, and seemed to point out the duty of man with the greatest clearness, hath so often failed of attaching men to the interests of virtue, cannot be the genuine source of moral goodness in the heart; but that the law within us, the principle from which all holy desires, all good counsels and all just works do proceed, is no other, than that good spirit of God, which will live and grow in every heart, christian or heathen, in proportion to it's earnestness of prayer to get loose from the bondage of corruption, into the glorious liberty of the sons of God.

To return now to our subject. We have seen that the ground-work of all reasoning is, and must be the knowledge of facts, and of the main circumstances with which they are attended, if we expect the discovery of real truth as the result of our enquiries: and since it is impossible for *man to know the things of God*,^a unless *God* be his teacher, agreeably to our blessed Saviour's declaration, *that no man knoweth the father but the son, and he to whomsoever the son will reveal him*; it will undeniably follow, that *reason cannot set one right step forward in speculating divine things without this heavenly instruction*. In speculations, indeed, meerly human, such as concern only the convenience or entertainment of civil life, let the boundaries, if you please, of reason be enlarged; let her be indulged in con-

^a 1 Cor. 2. 11.

jectures and hypotheses, on the subjects of philology, antiquities, measures of civil government, the philosophy of nature: or if she take delight in more romantick scenery, let her amuse herself with contemplating and arranging, in verse or prose, her own flimsy creations; and, for the emolument of those, whose aims extend no farther than to be speculatively virtuous, let her, in the very spirit of the exploded schoolmen, bring forth her gaudy train of fine conclusions, deduced from begged and arbitrary principles, concerning the native dignity and rectitude, the easy balance of the affections of the perverse, corrupted, evil heart of man. But let her ever beware of calling to these fantastic standards, *the high and lofty one that inhabiteth eternity!* of setting up her *clear and distinct ideas*, the unreal children of metaphysical brains, as the *criterion* of divine truth; and, from comparing her own shadowy, crude conceptions of God and heavenly things, let her beware of rashly pronouncing what the great eternal being is in himself, what he hath done, what he must, and what he cannot do in his dealings with mankind.

BUT if the pride of reason will, at all events, be leading her idolaters beyond the bounds of truth and soberness, to *intrude into those things which they have not seen, vainly puffed up by their fleshly mind*, still let the christian remember his proper, his only apology recommended by St. Peter. Let him stand within the sacred rampart of God's written word; that word whose warrant and seal of truth, to those who are not yet

yet converted, are the miracles to which it constantly appealeth. The subtle adversary will propose to discuss with him certain previous questions, but let him still bear in mind, that to the discussing of these questions, the knowledge of certain facts is required, which are known only to God, and him to whomsoever God will reveal them.

THUS one cavilling infidel will pretend, that the *wisdom* of the christian dispensation must be cleared up, before the gospel can be admitted as coming from God. He will urge that this dispensation is needless, and therefore not worthy of God for its author: he will alledge, that man standeth in need of no such help as the gospel offereth; and then, by way of proving his assertion, he will undertake to prove, that reason holdeth forth a sufficient and perfect rule of life; thus grossly mistaking the point in question, and flurring over the great and main purpose of the manifestation of the son of God in the flesh, the destroying the work of the devil in human nature, whose fall and ruin had been effected by his successful temptation of our first parents. How weakly would the suggestions of such an infidel be encountered by a pen, which, utterly silent concerning the true necessity of a redemption, should be employed in discussing the foreign, immaterial question, whether reason be sufficient to point out a *rule of life*! Would he not receive his most effectual confutation from our apostle's apologist, giving a plain and short detail of his christian hope; informing his adversary,

versary, on scripture-authority, (the best by which any past facts were ever ascertained,) that *Christ Jesus came to save that which was lost*, the ruined race of mankind, fallen into a state of death and alienation from God, and wanting, not so much a *rule*, as a *restorer of life*, a redeemer from the bondage of sin and corruption, a mediator to bring man unto God?

OTHER infidels will be demanding satisfaction to their doubts, with regard to certain circumstances attending the christian dispensation, to certain facts briefly recorded, or certain future destinations intimated in the scriptures of the old and new testament; they will call upon you to *vindicate* these supposed *ways of God*, tho' he hath himself assured you, that they are past finding out. You must inform them, as if you were in God's stead, why he should create man with a capacity of falling; why all *Adam's* posterity should be involved in the consequences of his transgression; how the sufferings and death of one person should avail to expiate the guilt of all mankind; why all will not finally be saved; why the Saviour did not come sooner into the world.

AND lastly, others will be calling you away with them to a nice and critical examination of the strength and propriety of the external evidences of the gospel; particularly they must be informed, why the resurrection of Jesus Christ was not more publick and attended with more convincing circumstances; or rather, why he, who *through death alone* was to overcome him
who

who had the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver those, who, being held in slavery by him, were oppressed with perpetual fears of eternal death; why, I say, this deliverer did not come down *alive* from the cross, to give his enemies and revilers the conviction they required.

THESE, and a thousand other curious questions, the true apologist will answer by one and the same short argument, *it is written*: the self-conceited or imprudent christian will call topical arguments to his aid; and forgetting that to a just and conclusive reasoning on these subjects, the clear and full knowledge of facts is requisite; forgetting that every transaction, divine and human, must necessarily have it's inexplicable difficulties, to those who are but partially acquainted with the circumstances of it; forgetting that infidels themselves have thought the providence of God sufficiently defended against atheists by the reflection that

“Tis but a part we see, and not the whole”
forgetting all these considerations, the weak or vain christian will sanguinely *produce his cause, bring forth his strong reasons* to account for all these difficulties; reasons founded, not upon those facts and realities which lie hid in the counsels of God, and which are the only true key for opening and explaining them, but upon meer hypothesis and conjecture, and therefore easily opposed with equal strength, by weapons drawn from the same inexhaustible armoury of human wit.

a Essay on man.

AND

AND thus it is, that the truths and doctrines of the glorious gospel are become, of late years, the subjects of debate to rhetorical declaimers, whose contest can come to no end, until one or other of the parties, either through meer fatigue, or a contempt of his adversary, or the manifest satiety of readers, shall throw aside his pen.

WHAT hath led even well-meaning divines so widely astray from the written word of God, the high way in which even fools cannot err, into the thorny wilderness of doubtful disputation, is, a supposition which the subtle adversary hath advanced, and they have too hastily adopted, that a speculative assent of reason to certain propositions contained in the bible, is at least the main, the efficacious part of saving, justifying faith. The assent of the mind once obtained, will, it is supposed, (would to God experience warranted the supposition!) immediately begin to operate, and produce a practice conformable to it. Hence hath almost the whole effort of modern theology been bent to obviate every difficulty, to silence every cavil of infidelity. Could this task be once effected, then would the heart, it is supposed, begin to follow the dictates of the understanding; the infidel would see and admire the divine beauty and harmony of the christian system, all his lusts would be subdued, and every thought and desire within him be brought into subjection to reason, adopting the gospel of Christ.

FAR different from this is the gospel-account of faith. It will there be found to be, not a specu-

speculative assent, but a principle naturally and essentially active, and *ενεργουμένη δι' αγωγής*, from the first moment that it hath taken root in the soil, prepared for it in the heart by repentance and humility. Faith is that victorious principle, which, by the unspeakable gift and favour or grace of God, is made to grow and spring up, not, as wild enthusiasm supposeth, instantaneously, but by a gradual, silent growth, *one knoweth not how*,^a in every soul which turneth itself to him with an awakened earnestness of desire to cleanse itself from the foul contagion of earthly lusts, and to purify itself as God is pure. When this desire is once kindled in the heart, then doth the spirit of God begin to grow and live and make it's abode there; then doth that trust and confidence and sure reliance on Jesus Christ the Saviour, then doth that implicit obedience to the divine will, (by which *Abraham* was justified) that active zeal for the honour of God and the salvation of mankind, begin to exert itself, which is all along in the holy scriptures represented, as the effect and work of faith. If a meer speculative assent, that assent by which the devils also believe, if this be at any time stiled faith, it is, as St. *James* assureth us, with no other sort of propriety, than that with which a carcase, void of it's life and spirit, is stiled a man. The carcase is not a man, but would be so, if it were animated by it's spirit: the assent of reason is not faith, but would be so, if it were animated by an heart effectually devoted to God,

^a *Mark* 4. 26, 27.

and earnestly labouring to overcome the world with it's various, gross pollutions.

HOWEVER therefore infidels may suggest, or mistaken christians believe, that the difficulty of conversion is over, when once the understanding hath assented to the truths of the gospel, and that rational conviction naturally and necessarily attacheth the will and affections; a little attention to experience, to the nature of the thing, or to the procedure of the divine architect will soon convince us, that the heavenly building of faith must be erected in the heart in an utterly inverted order. *Repent* and believe the gospel, (not *believe* the gospel and repent) was the language of the inspired forerunner of Christ, and of Christ himself, and of those, who, by his commission, went forth preaching every where that men should repent. The soul must feel and lament it's own disorders and corruptions, it must be converted, desire and long for it's cure, before it can be healed, even by the divine physician himself. In vain is the understanding addressed to, if there be in him, to whom you preach, *an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God*; an obstinate unwillingness to renounce the lusts and selfishness of his corrupted nature, and to place, in an offered Saviour, that full trust and reliance for all that he wanteth, and all that a good man can hope for, which is the true, saving, justifying faith. It was thro' the want of this humble, penitent disposition of the heart, that the Jews did not believe on Him, though He had done so many miracles before their eyes; and

and the same cause will ever produce the same infidelity.

BUT when repentance and humility have opened the heart, by which man believeth unto righteousness; have prepared the way of God, and made straight his paths in that intricate wilderness; when once the affections stand bent for the reception of the gospel, then will all things go on prosperously; then will the penitent's enquiries be regulated by gentleness and reverence; then will he with trembling earnestness demand, *what must I do to be saved?* who is the son of God that I may *believe on him?* then will he, *with meekness and fear*, request of you to set before him the doctrines of your christian hope; and, the spirit of God directing and ruling his heart, he will feel the salutary importance of them: all his cavils will at once be over, and he will cry out with tears, Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief! Cast down all vain reasonings within my heart; be thou my light and my truth, and lead me forth into the land of righteousness!

THAT this is the true procedure of christian preaching is acknowledged, is urged by those writers, who, at the same time, unaccountably engage their leisure and abilities in vain janglings with our infidel-adversaries. In the close of their disputation on the subject of the objections, which they undertook to refute, it is usual with them to observe, that those objections are not the real cause of men's aversion from christianity. A reluctance to repentance; a desire to be free from

the restraints of that self-denial, to which the gospel calleth mankind ; a fondness for the sinful lusts and passions of our corrupted nature ; these, say they, lie at the bottom of men's hearts, and dispose them to shut their eyes against the plain evidences of the gospel. The allegation is most certainly true ; but is it not wonderful, that the consideration of it should not turn the labours of these divines into another channel, calling them away from topical declamation, to the enforcing of those points, which, in their own account, are the only groundwork of true christian faith ? That it should not direct their whole efforts to that powerful species of preaching, which ever did and ever will, when seriously addressed, work mightily in the hearts of all who hear it : that preaching, which with an affectionate earnestness, joined to an exemplary holiness of life, and a noble detachment from earthly things, displayeth the present miserable state of man by nature, and the exceeding great love of our master and only Saviour, in undertaking to restore him to his original purity ; in dying for our sins, and rising again for our justification, and ascending into heaven to make intercession for us.

BE it therefore, let me close all in addressing myself to you, the rising apologists of the christian cause, be it your main concern to know the holy scriptures, which alone are able to make you wise unto your own, and the salvation of those souls, which may hereafter be committed to your charge. These will furnish you
with

with materials for the true apology, for which every christian is always to be prepared. But let it be your comfort, that you are entirely unconcerned in the vain task of attempting, or reading the attempts of others, to be *wise above what is written*, to justify and explain, by rhetorical pleadings, those ways of God, which he hath assured you, are past your finding out; imperfect masters as you are, of the whole train of facts and circumstances concerned in them, and infinitely short as your wisdom is, of that *which was with God, which knoweth his works, and was present when he made the world.*^a

WHATEVER reasonings the gospel needeth, lie in a narrow compass, and are founded on the sure basis of fact. The works, which never man did, bear witness to the worker that He is, what He declared Himself, the son of God. Behold the fortress, erected by the captain himself of our salvation, of a christian's reasoning! Let no proud conceit of your own understandings, tempt you to desert it, in order to try your strength with infidels on the treacherous ground of metaphysick, where you are in the utmost danger of falling, not so much by *their* strength, as by the very vehemence with which you *beat the air*. Check and rebuke the vanity of your own hearts, when they whisper to you, that the cause of christianity would sink under their attacks, if you did not stand forth to rescue it. The word of God will be it's own defence, quick and powerful as it is, and sharper than

^a *Wisd. 9. 9.*

any adversary's two edged sword. The infidel-performance will and must receive applause from infidels, an applause which no attempt of yours can deprive it of; but they who are christians in their hearts will reject it, and continue stedfast and unmoveable, not thro' your reasonings, but *knowing whom they have believed.*

BE not then drawn aside by the example of names, however great, to sacrifice to vain-glory in your christian or your clerical calling. Let the sphere of the great apostle's theological knowledge be large enough for you. Resolve not to know any thing as christians save Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Diligently trace the great plan of human redemption throughout the holy scriptures, where it lieth before you in almost every page. But remove far off from you the arrogant thought of hazarding, as far as in you lieth, the truth of the word of God, by resting it upon some new-invented topical argument, or by attempting to throw a new unheard of illustration upon any of it's doctrines. It is owing to this vain-glorious spirit, that the bible hath, of late years, been made a stage, whereon theological adventurers were to display their ingenious skill and dexterity. Not the plain and obvious simplicity of the gospel, but the fancied discovery of some new beauty or propriety in the scheme or expression of an inspired author, is almost every day proposed to our admiration; the exact train of tacit reasonings is laid open, on which some divine text is founded, and the unlettered fisherman is complimented

plimented with inspiration, not for the reasons, for which his epistle hath been received amongst the canonical scriptures, but for a chain of reflections, arbitrarily ascribed to him, which few perhaps, besides their ingenious author, would admit the justness of. *

BE not deceived with the flattering compliment which is often past upon the present times, that no age of the church hath been so peculiarly blest with able advocates for the christian cause. The present state of religion amongst us, compared with the number of books, which are daily coming forth upon that subject, is sufficient to convince you, that the true christian apology consisteth in something else, utterly different from learned or subtle argumentation, unless we are to admit, that religion is then most effectually supported, when the life and power of it are lost and destroyed. It is granted, that no age hath produced more of apparent zeal for christianity. But is it for that christianity whose residence is in the hearts of men? Which crucifieth this world with it's affections and lusts? Which tendeth to make us like unto God by purifying our hearts, thro' a lively, active, energetic faith, from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God? Or, is it a bare zeal for the bible, as a system of doctrines in the gross, careless how those doctrines are practised? A zeal for the honour of victory in what is called the academic exercise of wit? In a word, a zeal which leaveth off

a Warburton's Serm. on 1 John 4. 20.

where

where it should begin, spending it's strength in vehement contest for the bare truth of the gospel, and then neglecting to press, or but formally and coldly pressing it's precepts, upon the hearts and consciences of men? If some of the advocates for christianity have farther and better views than these which are now suggested, it is at least certain, that while they toil in endless disputation, they mistake the method by which Christ's holy religion is so to be cultivated, that it may bring forth that copious fruit, whereby the father is glorified.

Y O U will often be told indeed in opposition to these suggestions, that this is the very triumphant age of the church: that christianity never had so efficacious influence on the lives of men as at present: that the gospel, freed from the incumbrance of enthusiastick notions, and no longer the instrument of hierarchical tyranny, is now modelled into a rational system, and directed to the promoting of it's true, or at least it's principal end, the flourishing state of civil society: that christian charity, the very bond of perfectness, every where aboundeth beyond the example of all former ages, and that the poor and needy were never so amply relieved, as by that noble spirit which now reigneth in every heart; dispensing it's bounty like the God of heaven; kind, like him, to the unthankful and the evil, and turning even the sensual lusts of the profligate and abandoned, into a glorious occasion of exerting the godlike virtue of charity!

AND if your aim be only to keep pace with your neighbours, to embrace a political scheme, let me call it, of religion: if you wish only to see the flourishing state of a nominal church, you will then readily acquiesce in this soothing account. You will be contented with a plan of christianity accommodated to worldly ease, and worldly pomp and splendor; warping the maxims of the heavenly to the false interests of an earthly kingdom: flattering the lusts and pride of those who are holden and overwhelmed by them, palliating and even applauding, for the sake of certain social benefits which accidentally arise from it, the spirit-defiling luxury of rich men, who are clothed in purple and fine linen, and withhold not their heart from any joy; lulling them into a fatal security, by perswading them that they may be christians with the habitual renunciation of every christian temper; and bestowing the praise and the rewards of the all-powerful virtue of charity on one single, and that the least sincere, token of it's power in the heart; a power, which it is most evident from the whole tenor of the gospel doth not truly subsist, but where it displayeth itself in all those various instances, which are enumerated by St. Paul in his consummate character of christian love.^a

BUT if your consciences should start back at this true picture of fashionable christianity; if

^a 1 Cor. 13.

your honest, good, ingenuous hearts should suggest to you on comparing it's maxims with the doctrines of the blessed gospel, that the soothing glosses of the scribes and pharisees have made the commands of God of none effect, have stifled the spirit of them, and robbed them of all their power unto salvation; this suggestion, we may hope, will urge you to make haste out of this broad way, which promiseth life but leadeth to destruction; and to take him for your guide, who is the way, the truth, and the life. His word, unsophisticated by flattering qualifying comments and paraphrases, will instruct you to depend for salvation on nothing else, but that living faith in Jesus Christ, whose true nature hath been already explained to you; that faith which uniformly presseth the heart, where it hath taken root, to devote and offer up itself continually a living sacrifice to God's glory: to keep a watchful guard, that it be not at any time overcharged and surfeited with what the holy scripture representeth as the very badge of our slavery to sin, the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches and the lust of the pleasures and pomps of life; and to consider deeply, whether you may not yourselves be far advanced in that fatal state, while the fashion of this world may flatter you to presume that all is safe and innocent.

To this important end, it may be useful seriously to compare your lives with those of professed infidels; and if you find no difference between

tween them, but what is made by a meer affirmation and negation of certain propositions, and perhaps a few outward, formal acts of religion; if the same strong attachment to pleasure and amusements, trifling at best, perhaps pernicious also; the same hastening to be rich, the same trust in riches; the same panting after worldly greatness and the praise of men; if the same pride, and resentment, and malice, and envy reign in either heart, then may you know, that the kingdom of God is not yet erected within you, but that your life and tempers are the strongest refutation of every argument against infidelity, which your reason and subtlety can suggest. The infidel's reply would be, at least by you, unanswerable. In order, might he say, to become a christian, if you are one, all I need is to embrace a set of bare, speculative opinions; we are already alike in every other particular. I follow the moral parts of your gospel: I obey the dictates of moral truth (the pretence of every infidel) and am not unmindful of publick and private charities. I give thanks for God's bounties by a free enjoyment of them; and if I love this world and the things of it; if my hopes and fears, my joys and griefs are all governed by it; if it is the standard of all my schemes and measures of acting; if I attend to the advancement of my fortune as a great and important concern; if I flatter, bow to, and fawn upon those who can advance me: I hope, and fear, and joy, and grieve, and scheme, and judge, and act, and live like you.

L E T

LET me conclude all, therefore, with what hath been often already, on the apostle's authority, but cannot be too often suggested, that the strongest and most effectual defence of our christian hope is a blameless christian conversation. This is an argument adapted alike to silence, to shame the malevolent accuser, and to engage the hearts of the ingenuous; and accordingly hath never been known to fail, especially when addressed to the world by those who hold high and eminent stations, of wonderful success.

BUT be ever upon your guard that ye be not deceived by taking your measures of christian conversation, either from the glosses and qualifying comments of smooth-tongued prophets, or from the examples of those who wear the garb and form of religion, estranged all the while, by earthly habits and attachments, from it's power and spirit. Remember what hath been now observed to you on the sure warrant of experience, that subtle, metaphysical defences, new topical arguments framed for evincing the truth of christianity, serve to little purpose besides the idle amusement of the curious reader, and the vain reputation of the parading writer; have no tendency to advance the kingdom of God in the hearts of those, who modestly and reverently enquire concerning the christian hope of salvation, or to put to silence the stubborn adversary. His most prevailing, however it be no reasonable, argument against the doctrine of the cross, is it's little influence on the lives of it's professors;

fors; and the apostle hath, in the words of our text, suggested to us it's proper and indeed it's only effectual confutation; "a good conscience, "a blameless conversation in Christ:" a conversation regulated by the plain rules of the blessed word of God, interpreted by an heart effectually and fixedly converted unto Him, and, thro' a living faith, victorious over the world: dead to the temptations of wealth and honour and pleasure, and that empty praise of men, which is, for the most part, bestowed with the greatest profusion on those, whose hearts must give it all the lie: zealously disposed, not only in the pulpit, or from the press, but alway, in every thought, and word, and deed, to promote the glory of God in the salvation of the souls of man: chearfully prepared to undergo the cross, despising the shame, of that persecution, which all who will live religiously in this world must undergo from the hands of christians falsely so called: nothing terrified by the imputation of singularity, affectation, enthusiasm, so constantly fixed upon a steady adherence to the plain and obvious dictates of the gospel of Christ: above all things, engaged in earnest and never-ceasing prayer to God, that his good spirit abiding in us may open the eyes of our blinded understandings; that so, we may know that efficacious love of Him *which passeth knowledge*: that, the spirit of God being our teacher, we may learn, what no human instructions, no admonitions of reason can teach us, "to practice

"do the good we know;" to avoid evil, and to do good; to be holy, harmless, charitable, undefiled, separate from sinners; and in the number of those blessed poor in spirit, those pure in heart, who shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world and the resurrection from the dead; who shall see God, and enjoy his heavenly kingdom in life everlasting.

F I N I S.
